

Factors Influencing Students' Career Choice and Aspirations in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to determine factors influencing career choice and aspirations among South African students. A quantitative paradigm guided this study. A survey method in the form of a structured questionnaire was used in this study in order to identify the factors that influence career choice and aspirations among South African students. A purposive sample of 133 first and second year university students (77 females, 56 males; age range 15 to 30 years) participated in the study. The Career Aspirations Questionnaire was used in this study. Career Aspirations Questionnaire which explored the factors that influence medical students' career choice and aspirations. Data were analysed using percentages and tables. The study found that the family; the ability of the learner self to identify his/her preferred career choice; and teachers were significant factors that influence the career choice and aspirations of students. The implications of the findings and practical considerations are discussed in the study.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies show that new students all over the world are usually faced with a dilemma in making a career choice decision in their lives (Bandura et al. 2001; Cherian 1991; Issa and Nwalo 2008; Macgregor 2007; McMahon and Watson 2005; Watson et al. 2010). In most cases, the choice of careers, subjects, and courses of study and the subsequent career paths to follow are a nightmare for prospective undergraduate students (Issa and Nwalo 2008). Most often, choosing the right subject combination leading to the right profession can make the difference between enjoying and detesting the career in future. Each individual undergoing the process of making a career choice is influenced by such factors as the context in which they live, their personal aptitudes, and educational attainment (Bandura et al. 2001; Watson et al. 2010). In their study, Watson et al. (2010) found that the majority of aspirations were for social type occupations followed by investigative type

occupations, with boys aspiring more to investigative and girls more to social type occupations. The same study reported that more than 80 % of the total sample aspired to high status occupations (Watson et al. 2010).

In his study, Ngesi (2003) found that poor financial base of students from disadvantaged communities deter choices of appropriate educational programmes and careers. Such students tend to avoid careers which appear to them to require long period of training their finance cannot support (Ngesi 2003). This suggests that students from lower socio-economic families are not given adequate space to make independent decisions on their careers. It is clear from these findings that despite the limited state resources available, the shortage of high level skills and a pressing need to raise income levels among the poor, high student drop-out and failure rates are a major problem in South African universities.

Studies have also investigated factors that influence career choice by high school students (Dick and Rallis 1991; Jawitz et al. 2000; Mudhovozi and Chireshe 2012; Southwick 2000). For example, in their study of socio-demographic factors that anchor career choice among psychology students in South Africa, Mudhovozi and Chireshe (2012) found that the participants who attended rural-situated public schools made delayed career decisions. The same study also found that participants were mainly influenced

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by parents, teachers and friends to choose psychology as a career. Southwick (2000) observed the trend towards a decline in graduate enrollments in health-related fields and in science and engineering. Palmer (2005) also noted the reduction in the numbers and calibre of students seeking admissions into engineering education in Australia. The poor image of the engineering profession generally and the poor understanding of engineering in schools were identified as contributing factors for the poor calibre of students. In his study of career choice of Nigerian youths, Salami (1999) found that many youths made wrong career choices due to ignorance, inexperience, peer pressure, advice from friends, parents and teachers, or as a result of prestige attached to certain jobs without adequate vocational guidance and career counseling. Similarly, Sax (1994) examined students' initial interest in science careers, factors influencing career choice during college, and how these factors differ between men and women students. Sax found that men who abandon career aspirations appear to be driven by financial concerns while women were more concerned with the social good of their career choice. In a similar vein, Perry (2006) asserts that adolescent career choice is influenced by life context, personal attitudes, and educational attainment.

Other studies have separately examined the influences of each parent on the career choices of their sons or daughters and have found that mothers tend to have more influence on the career decisions/aspirations of their children than fathers. For example, in their study of 70 young adults in 1986, Mickelson and Velasco (1998) found that mothers were the most influential and that daughters' occupational aspirations were often similar to their mothers' chosen professions. In similar studies, students were asked items such as, "What do you want to do with your life?" and to indicate if they agree or disagree with statements such as "My mother (father) encouraged me to make my own decisions." The students' responses were similar to those of their parents (Mickelson and Velasco 1998; Wims 1994). These studies also found that students wanted to discuss career planning primarily with their mothers. Similarly, in their study of factors that influence children's career choices, Muthukrishna and Sokoya (2008) found the mother as the most influential person adolescents talk to concerning their career choice.

Mothers were cited as particularly influential because they provide support that eases children's apprehensions about careers (Hairston 2000). For example, in their study of career choice among a sample of South African students, Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) reported that their parents had a significant influence on their career decisions but mothers were more influential. This implies that mothers play a major role in career choice of their children.

Research studies show that families, parents and guardians in particular, play a significant role in the occupational aspirations and career goal development of their children. Without parental approval or support, students and young adults are often reluctant to pursue or even explore diverse career possibilities. Several studies (Knowles 1998; Mau and Bikos 2000; Wilson and Wilson 1992) have found that college students and young adults cite parents as an important influence on their choice of career. In a similar vein, some studies have found that the family plays a critical role in a child's career development (Guerra and Braungart-Rieker 1999; Mickelson and Valasco 1998; Otto 2000). Some of the variables that influence students' occupational goals include the family, level of parental education, school, peers, personality, and socioeconomic status (Crockett and Bingham 2000; Wilson and Wilson 1992). There are varying opinions and findings, however, as to which specific family characteristics influence career aspirations. For instance, conflicting data exist regarding the influence of socioeconomic variables. Other studies (Mau and Bikos 2000) suggest that both parent education and income influence career aspirations, whilst other studies (Hossler and Stage 1992; Wilson and Wilson 1992) show that only parent education is an influence.

Other family variables that have been shown to influence career aspirations include the parents' occupation (Trice 1991) and family size (Downey 1995; Marjoribanks 1997; Singh et al. 1995). The father's occupational status is highly correlated with his son's occupation (Blau 1992; Conroy 1997). Family size also appears to influence adolescent career aspirations because parents with large families tend to have less money to aid the older children in attending college, while younger children may receive more financial assistance since the financial strain is less once the older children leave home (Schulen-

berg et al. 1984). On the contrary, other studies (Boatwright et al. 1992), found that each of these family variables to be insignificant in influencing aspirations. Nevertheless, most studies have been consistent and suggest that adolescents' own aspirations are influenced by their parents' aspirations or expectations for them. This implies that when adolescents perceive their parents to have high educational expectations for them, adolescents are more likely to have higher aspirations for themselves. A 1998 Sylvan Learning Center report indicates that parents' and children's views about career aspirations are more compatible than incompatible. Parents are influential figures with whom, whether intentionally or unintentionally, children become aware of and get exposed to occupations or career opportunities and implied expectations.

In a similar vein, some studies suggest that children are influenced in their career choice by socio-demographic factors and these factors include family, school and peers (Kniveton 2004; Mathombela 1997; Salami 2006). In his study, Salami (2006) found that family involvement as the most significant predictor of career choice in gender-dominated occupations. Similarly, Kniveton (2004) found that the family provides information and guidance directly or indirectly and influences young people's career choice. For example, parents offer appropriate support for certain occupational choices which tend to follow their own (Small and McClean 2002).

The school where one is educated plays an important influence on one's career choice (Weishew and Penk 1993). In his study, Garrahy (2001) noted that schools are social institutions that reinforce gender-appropriate behaviour, interests and occupations. Such constructs including curricular subjects, quality of teaching, student participation in school activities, school practices and policies and learning materials for the student were found to impact on career choice among learners (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006). In his study, Spade (2001) found that gender difference in the learners' experiences starts at pre-school and continues throughout their educational careers. Teachers like parents are viewed as key players in the career paths that young people eventually pursue especially girls (Barnett 2007). In her study in Nigeria, Denga (2004) found that sex-role stereotypes exist among boys and girls in primary schools as they aspire to traditional occupations. This implies

that parents' and teachers' beliefs influence their children's self-perceptions of ability and consequently career choice. In fact, studies show that some teachers encourage students to take certain subject options that are congruent with aptitudes and abilities that they identify (Falaye and Adams 2008).

Similarly, Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) found that career choices of tertiary students from previously disadvantaged schools are negatively impacted by lack of finance, lack of career information, poor academic performance and unsatisfactory career counseling services. Another study by Maree and Beck (2004) indicates that in disadvantaged communities, schools with career counselling programme were under-utilizing the facility which was also viewed as too expensive. In his most recent study, Maree (2009) found that many learners passed Grade 12 without having received career counselling in any form and consequently denied the opportunity to apply for acceptance into sought-after fields of study at tertiary training institutions.

Other studies show that peers play a major role in career choice of students (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006; Stuart 2000). For example, Stuart (2000) found that peers' attitudes toward gender and ethnicity may increase or decrease a person's confidence in pursuing a career. Adolescents are easily influenced by their peers because they rely on their friends to provide validation of the choices that they make including career decisions. On the contrary, Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) found that peers were reported not to be marginally influential in career decision making among university students.

Goals of the Study: The goals of this study were: (a) to determine factors that influence student career choice; and (b) aspirations among South African University students.

METHODS

Research Design

The research method followed in this study is mainly quantitative, which is both descriptive and exploratory in nature. A survey method in the form of a structured questionnaire was used in this study in order to identify the factors that influence career choice and aspirations among South African students. The design was chosen because it is convenient for capturing the

opinions of participants on a phenomenon (de Vos et al. 2011).

Sample

The population of this study comprised of all first and second year students in the Faculty of Education in each of three South African universities used in this study. A purposive sample of 133 first and second year students out of a target sample of 150 students was used in this study. Purposive sampling was used because the participants used were familiar with career choice information sought in this study. The three universities were located in the following provinces: KwaZulu–Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape, respectively. The sample distribution was as follows: 49 students from KwaZulu–Natal; 46 Eastern Cape; and 38 Western Cape, respectively. In this study, 77 (57.89 %) of the participants were male and 56 (42.11 %) were female; 109 (81.96 %) were aged between 21 – 25 years; 126 (94.74 %) were South Africans and the rest were non–South Africans; 116 (87.22 %) were Black and no Whites participated in this study; and 121 (90.98 %) were registered for the undergraduate studies.

Instrument

The Career Aspirations Questionnaire was used to determine factors influencing career choice and aspirations among South African students in this study. The Career Aspirations Questionnaire used in this study was adapted from the Antony's (1999) Career Aspirations Questionnaire which explored the factors that influence medical students' career choice and aspirations. As described in Antony (1999), the factors that influence students to aspire to do their careers are generally the same. The Antony's (1999) Career Aspirations Questionnaire was designed to find out the interest of the students towards their career path. This questionnaire helps the students to prepare firmly towards their goal and it helps the students to explore their preferences and strengths. The Career Aspirations Questionnaire developed was pilot studied to an equivalent sample of 20 students not used in the main study. The Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.75. This implies that the Career Aspirations Questionnaire is high and reliable to the sample

used in this study. To ensure validity, the questionnaire was given to two experts in Educational Psychology to check if the language used was clear to the respondents.

Procedure

A contact lecturer within each of the three universities used in this study was requested to distribute questionnaires to their 50 students (25 first year and 25 second year students) for completion. The questionnaires were sent by post to the three contact lecturers at the three universities. Out of the 150 questionnaires distributed, only 133 (88.7 %) of them were returned back fully completed. This was a very high return rate of the questionnaires distributed to the participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using percentages and tables in this study.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was sought from Research and Ethics Committees of each of the three universities and this was granted. Consent was also sought from all the participants. Participants were assured that data collected from the study would be kept confidential and used only for purposes of this study. Participation was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

RESULTS

The findings of the study are shown below according to themes:

Demographic Data

Table 1 shows the demographic data and this consists of the following items: gender, nationality, race, age and degree level of participants. The majority 77 (57.89 %) of the participants were male whilst the remainder 56 (42.11 %) were female. The majority of the respondents 126 (94.74 %) were South Africans and the rest were non–South Africans. The majority 116 (87.22 %) were Black and that no Whites participated in this study. The majority of the respondents 109 (81.96

Table 1: Gender, nationality, race, age and degree level of respondents

<i>Demographic items (n=133)</i>		<i>KwaZulu-Natal</i>		<i>Eastern Cape</i>		<i>Western Cape</i>		<i>Total</i>	
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Gender:</i>	Female	33	24.81	19	14.29	25	18.80	77	57.89
	Male	16	12.03	27	20.30	13	9.77	56	42.11
Total		49	36.84	46	34.59	38	28.57	133	
<i>Nationality:</i>	S.A.	47	35.34	46	34.59	33	24.81	126	94.74
	Other	2	1.50	0	0	5	3.76	7	5.26
Total		49		46		38		133	
<i>Race:</i>	Black	47	35.34	46	34.59	23	17.29	116	87.22
	White	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Indian	2	1.50	0	0	3	2.26	5	3.76
	Coloured	0	0	0	0	12	9.02	12	9.02
Total		49		46		38		133	
<i>Ethnic Groups</i>	15-20	15	11.28	9	6.77	26	19.55	50	37.6
	21-25	28	21.05	19	14.29	12	9.02	59	44.36
	26-29	2	1.50	10	7.52	0	0	12	9.02
	30 and older	4	3.01	8	6.02	0	0	12	9.02
Total		49		46		38		133	
<i>Degree Level:</i>	Undergraduate	41	30.83	45	33.83	35	26.32	121	90.98
	Post graduate	0	0	1	0.75	0	0	1	0.75
	Other	8	6.02	0	0	3	2.26	11	8.27
Total		49		46		38		133	

%) were aged between 21–25 years. The majority of respondents 121 (90.98 %) were registered for the undergraduate studies.

Factors Affecting Career Choices

Table 2 shows that family (30.83 %) is a significant factor in determining children's career choice. The second factor that is evident is the ability of the learner self (30.08 %) to identify his/her preferred career choice. Teachers are the third major factor (20.30 %) influencing career choice of their learners.

Table 3 shows that career choices are decided long before the learners come to universities. The majority of respondents (36.84 %) attribute their career choice at universities to subject

choices they made whilst they were still in schools.

Table 4 shows that the majority (59.4%) of the respondents got their first choice of what they wanted to pursue in their studies. This is consistent with their claim in Table 6 that they made their career choices while at school by choosing the right subjects to prepare them for their future careers.

Table 5 shows that the majority (91.73%) of the respondents do not regret the decision to pursue their current career choices. This implies that career counselling at school made a significant impact on their future career choices.

Table 6 shows that the majority (78.20%) of respondents did not change their study program (that is, degree) since registering as a student at

Table 2: Career choice

<i>Who most influenced your career choice?</i>	<i>KwaZulu-Natal</i>		<i>Eastern Cape</i>		<i>Western Cape</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
No one	16	12.03	12	9.02	12	9.02	40	30.08
Family members	14	10.53	16	12.03	11	8.27	41	30.83
My teachers	8	6.02	10	7.52	9	6.77	27	20.30
Friends and acquaintances	6	4.51	3	2.26	3	2.26	12	9.02
Other	5	3.76	5	3.76	3	2.26	13	9.77
Total	49		46		38		133	

Table 3: Influence on career choice

<i>Was your career choice influenced by the following?</i>	<i>KwaZulu-Natal</i>		<i>Eastern Cape</i>		<i>Western Cape</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Subject at Grade 12 – qualification	13	9.77	20	15.04	16	12.03	49	36.84
Ability to pay course fees	1	0.75	3	2.26	1	0.75	5	3.76
Interests	3	2.26	10	7.52	4	3.01	17	12.78
Values	4	3.01	7	5.26	0	0	11	8.27
Salary and labour market	20	15.04	4	3.01	16	12.03	40	30.08
Other	8	6.02	2	1.50	1	0.75	11	8.27
Total	49		46		38		133	

Table 4: Which choice of course did you get?

<i>Which choice of the course you've applied for at varsity did you get?</i>	<i>KwaZulu-Natal</i>		<i>Eastern Cape</i>		<i>Western Cape</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
1 st choice	25	18.80	29	21.80	25	18.80	79	59.4
2 nd choice	20	15.04	10	7.52	11	8.27	41	30.83
3 rd choice	1	0.75	3	2.26	0	0	4	3.01
None	3	2.26	4	3.01	2	1.50	9	6.76
Total	49		46		38		133	

Table 5: Regret registering the course

<i>Do you regret registering the course you are currently doing?</i>	<i>KwaZulu-Natal</i>		<i>Eastern Cape</i>		<i>Western Cape</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	7	5.26	3	2.26	1	0.75	11	8.27
No	42	31.58	43	32.33	37	27.82	122	91.73
Total	49		46		38		133	

Table 6: Change of programme since started studying?

<i>Have you ever changed your program (that is degree) since enrolled as student at varsity?</i>	<i>KwaZulu-Natal</i>		<i>Eastern Cape</i>		<i>Western Cape</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	14	10.53	1	0.75	14	10.53	29	21.8
No	35	26.32	45	33.83	24	18.05	104	78.2
Total	49		46		38		133	

a university. This appears to confirm the fact that these learners knew what they intended studying after completing their Grade 12.

Table 7 shows that respondents changed the study program (that is, degree) due to various reasons including: failed previous programme

(8.27%); initial course demanding (5.26%); did not like initial course (4.51%); could not balance work and study; (0.75%); and financial problems (1.5%). There were no respondents who indicated child birth and pregnancy (0%) as a reason for changing the programme.

Table 7: Why change your programme?

<i>If yes to no. 16, why did you change your</i>	<i>KwaZulu-Natal</i>		<i>Eastern Cape</i>		<i>Western Cape</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Failed previous program	6	4.51	0	0	5	3.76	11	8.27
Initial course too demanding	3	2.26	1	0.75	3	2.26	7	5.26
Did not like initial course	3	2.26	0	0	3	2.26	6	4.51
Could not balance work and study	1	0.75	0	0	0	0	1	0.75
Had financial problems	2	1.50	0	0	0	0	2	1.5
Child birth and pregnancy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	34	25.56	45	33.83	27	20.30	106	79.7
Total	49		46		38		133	

Table 8: Thinking of dropping out

<i>Are you thinking of dropping out of university?</i>	<i>KwaZulu-Natal</i>		<i>Eastern Cape</i>		<i>Western Cape</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	2	1.50	4	3.01	1	0.75	7	5.26
No	47	35.34	42	31.58	37	27.82	126	94.74
Total	49		46		38		133	

a university. This appears to confirm the fact that these learners knew what they intended studying after completing their Grade 12.

Table 7 shows that respondents changed the study program (that is, degree) due to various reasons including: failed previous programme (8.27%); initial course demanding (5.26%); did not like initial course (4.51%); could not balance work and study; (0.75%); and financial problems (1.5%). There were no respondents who indicated child birth and pregnancy (0%) as a reason for changing the programme.

Table 8 shows that the majority (94.74%) of respondents did not think of dropping out of the university.

DISCUSSION

The issue of career choice and aspirations of students can be a nightmare if students do not receive career counselling and support from the family (parents) and peers. This study found that the family is a significant factor in determining children's career choice; the ability of the learner self to identify his/her preferred career choice; and teachers influence career choice of their learners. These findings are consistent with the findings of other studies that have examined

the influences of each parent on the career choices of their sons or daughters and have found that mothers tend to have more influence on the career decisions/aspirations of their children than fathers (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006; Mickelson and Velasco 1998; Mudhovozi and Chireshe 2012; Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008). For example, Mickelson and Velasco (1998) found that mothers were the most influential and that daughters' occupational aspirations were often similar to their mothers' chosen professions. Similarly, Muthukrishna and Sokoya (2008) found that the mother was the most influential person adolescents talk to concerning their career choice. This implies that since mothers provide support that eases the children's apprehensions about careers, they play a major role in career choice of their children.

The study found that career choices are decided long before the learners come to universities. The majority of respondents attribute their career choice at universities to subject choices they made whilst they were still in schools. These findings are consistent with literature (Barnett 2007; Garrahy 2001; McMahon and Watson 2005; Watson et al. 2010; Weishew and Penk 1993). These studies show that the school where one is educated plays an important influence on

one's career choice (Weishew and Penk 1993). In his study, Garrahy (2001) noted that schools are social institutions that reinforce gender-appropriate behaviour, interests and occupations. Such constructs including curricular subjects, quality of teaching, student participation in school activities, school practices and policies and learning materials for the student were found to impact on career choice among learners (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006; McMahon and Watson 2005). In his study, Spade (2001) found that gender difference in the learners' experiences starts at pre-school and continues throughout their educational careers.

Besides the family as a significant factor in determining children's career choice, and the ability of the learner self to identify his/her preferred career choice; we have teachers as major influences in career choice of their learners. Teachers like parents are viewed as key players (or role models) in the career paths that young people eventually pursue especially girls (Barnett 2007). In her study in Nigeria, Denga (2004) found that sex-role stereotypes existed among boys and girls in primary schools as they aspire to traditional occupations. This implies that teachers' beliefs influence their learners' self-perceptions of ability and consequently career choice. In fact, some teachers encourage students to take certain subject options that are congruent with aptitudes and abilities that they identify (Falaye and Adams 2008). The above findings are consistent with literature (Barnett 2007; Denga 2004; Falaye and Adams 2008).

Studies show that once the students have got their first choice of what they wanted to pursue in their studies, they also make their career choices while at school by choosing the right subjects to prepare them for their future careers. It appears that making the correct career choice matches with the correct subject choice at university. As such, students are less likely to regret making their decision to pursue their current career choices. All these things will fall in line provided that career counselling at school made a significant impact on their future career choices. In addition, there is a less likely that students will change their study program (that is, degree) since these learners knew what they intended studying after completing their Grade 12. However, some students change the study program (that is, degree) if they have failed the previous programme; the initial course is

demanding and they cannot cope; or they did not like initial course; could not balance work and study; and if they had financial problems.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings above, the study concludes that the family; the ability of the learner self to identify his/her preferred career choice; and teachers are significant factors that influence career choice of learners. In addition, the family and teachers' support to learners play a significant role in career choice and aspirations of students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order for students to make the right career choice, the family (parents) should be encouraged not to force their children into careers. With parental guidance and support, children are able to make the right career choice.

Teachers like parents work very closely with learners in schools and they know the abilities of their students in various subjects. Therefore, teachers should guide their students in their career choice and aspirations in line with their abilities in various subjects.

Schools need to provide career guidance to learners during their high school studies. The career guidance programmes guide learners in making their career choices and aspirations before entering university.

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